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Cohesion as a Deterrant to Stress for Rotational Deployment Units

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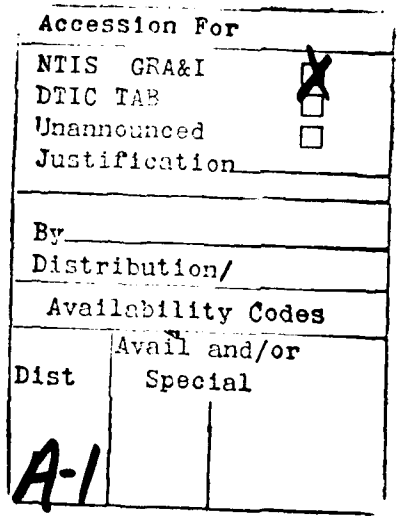

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This research note was prepared in response to a request from the 82d Airborne Division to identify ways to reduce stress casualties and overall levels of unit stress. The Ft. Benning Field Unit of ARI is responsible for leading the research efforts on Light Infantry tactics and doctrine.

The mission of light infantry units, particularly those that are airborne, demands that all soldiers are at the peak of readiness. One apparent deterrant to readiness is the buildup of stress over extended periods of time. In this research note, a stress management program is presented which, when properly applied, will reduce overall stress levels in units tasked with rotational deployment preparedness. Keywords: Leadership, Stress Psychology, Stress Physiology, Fatigue Physiology, Morale, Skills. (AW)

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COHESION AS A DETERRENT TO STRESS FOR ROTATIONAL DEPLOYMENT UNITS

CONTENTS

". . . the Bible records the panic and paralyzing fright of participants in battle." (Glass, 1951)

Introduction

The U.S. Army has been concerned about the physiological and psychological effects of stress on combat soldiers and in relatively recent times has sought to systematically address the problem (Kubala & Warnick, 1979, Mangelsdorff, 1980). Stress and its associated effects are likely to be encountered in every battle. With this realization, Field Manual 26-2, Management of Stress in Army Operations, (Department of the Army, 1986) was published. It presents an overview of the most current information regarding combat situations which induce stress (referred to as "stressors") and methods commanders can use to counter stress. FM 26-2 is informative and does a good job of outlining preventative measures for most combat units. This manual should serve as a commander and staff officer's most frequently used reference for dealing with stress reduction.

However, FM 26-2 does not directly address the mission and operational expectations faced by airborne battalions. This product was prepared in response to a specific request from the 82d Airborne Division to identify ways to reduce stress casualties. Airborne units must be prepared for immediate deployment with a very limited amount of preparatory time on a recurring basis. This report has been written to compliment the knowledge and concepts found in FM 26-2 by providing a discussion of recent observations of combat related stress and their impact on the unit. In addition, we will provide guidance for the establishment of a unit stress management program.

Overview

Airborne units, as well as others rotating into hazardous assignments, face potentially catastrophic situations on every assignment. The mass casualties suffered by the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in the 1986 crash of a commercial troop transport provided an opportunity to study the effects of the loss of a major portion of a battalion and the model used by the division to reconstitute the force (Bartone, Ingraham, Saczynski, Ursano, & Russell, 1987). The fact that units are required to be the reaction force on a rotational schedule adds to the complexity of the stress environment. When not in the reaction force mode, training and post support consume the time and energy of the unit. There is no real time to relax or recover from the stress of the present or future mission. Routine training and even returning from hazardous duty assignments presents the possibility of catastrophic loss and the constant presence of stress.

It is not unrealistic to expect unit personnel to be prepared to deal with routine stress. It is, however, unrealistic to expect a unit to always be prepared to conduct assigned missions, be fully staffed, and trained for all potential missions. The nature of combat readiness activities precludes the possibility of being fully prepared. Reality often shows us that even in the best prepared units there are going to be some tradeoffs, based on prudent risk analyses, to assure the most appropriate application of available resources to

the most critical mission. The environment in which the airborne unit operates is by the nature of the mission and mode of delivery one of constant stress.

There is, however, a way the unit can reduce the effects of stress while at the same time increasing unit readiness. A stress reduction and inoculation program for units facing support, training, and mission cycles can be developed and maintained with battalion level assets. The success of the program will depend in large measure on the degree of command emphasis and the interest demonstrated by leaders within the unit. The program will vary in emphasis commensurate with the changing unit priorities with rotational cycle missions. Stress management has been identified as a command responsibility within FM 26-2 and when appropriately implemented can be a force multiplier.

Stages of Stress

Stress casualties do not just appear. There is a pattern to the process which reduces a soldier to a state of ineffectiveness. FM 22-6 outlines the process in three stages -- each person will manifest the symptoms of each stage a little differently. As we will discuss later, fully implementing the leadership principle of "knowing your men" will greatly assist leaders in recognizing subtle individual stress symptoms. Obvious signs of fatigue or anxiousness are not always the cues. Individuals often provide subtle information to their leaders simply in the way they routinely perform their duty. Out of the ordinary behavior during training and readiness exercises should be evaluated to determine if the behavior is a stress reaction.

Alarm Reaction

The first stage is termed "alarm reaction." This occurs at the onset of the stressful event which, in combat, is most likely a shared experience for the unit. An obvious indicator of the onset of stress is a reduction of unit efficiency, but this may go unnoticed if the inefficiencies do not significantly reduce unit performance. For this reason, it is not uncommon for this preliminary stage to go unnoticed. Hence, it is imperative that leaders be aware of subtle changes in their unit's performance and that they remain in touch with their people.

Alternatively, the stressful event may be one that the leader does not have in common with the soldier: It may be something that the soldier is concerned about from his private life. During this situation it is very difficult to identify that stress exists within the soldier. Again, leaders must know their men in order to notice subtle changes in behavior which may indicate stress.

Resistance

The second stage is labelled the period of resistance. This stage will usually last the longest of the three. During the resistance period the individual calls on all his resources to continue performing his assigned mission while being drained of energy and often succumbing to debilitating anxiety. Clearly there is little time for extensive intervention (e.g.,

lengthy counseling sessions over an extended period of time), highlighting the need for a good overall preventative stress management program.

Exhaustion

The final stage is exhaustion and follows no fixed schedule. At this time a stress casualty exists and needs attention.

Cohesion as a Stress Variable

While the absence of small unit cohesion does not account for all, or possibly even a large portion of combat stress/battle shock casualties, sufficient evidence exists to support the benefits of cohesion within a unit. Cohesion is defined in the dictionary as the act or state of uniting. The uniting within a unit can be enhanced by specialized training, shared experience and bonding (Griffith, 1987), and stability (Bartone, 1987). A body of research is being developed to measure various aspects of cohesion and to determine its impact on the effectiveness of units.

Israeli Combat Experience

Recent Israeli combat experience revealed that a number of stress factors influenced the severity of combat casualties units suffered (Belenky, Tyner, & Sodetz, 1983). In a study conducted by Noy in 1978, and reported by Belenky, et al. (1983), of 40 Israeli Defense Force soldiers who had suffered battle shock during the 1973 war, 35 percent had been seriously wounded. Of those, 70 percent suffered their physical injuries as a direct result of their battle shock. Forty percent of the battle shock group reported minimal group cohesion and unit identification and interpersonal difficulties within the unit. Soldiers who did not have cohesive bonds with comrades, or who had stressful home situations, were more vulnerable to battle shock (Belenky, et al., 1983). Soldiers who had low morale, lack of trust in their leadership, and a poor perspective on unit identification were more susceptible to battle shock (Steiner & Neumann, 1978).

Antecedent Conditions and Cohesion

In a study meant to measure in part significant relationships between antecedent conditions (e.g., individual, organizational, community, installation, and unit replacement characteristics) and cohesion, data were collected from over 17,000 soldiers representing 93 companies (57 Unit Replacement companies and 36 Individual Replacement companies, Griffith, 1987). Griffith (1987) presented results which suggested that soldiers who shared experiences and were in units in which personnel were stabilized, reported higher levels of cohesion than soldiers who did not. Griffith (1987) went further and stated that soldiers in units with specialized training (e.g., airborne) had greater cohesion than soldiers in units with less specialized training. Those having socio-environmental stressors had lower levels of cohesion.

Taken together, the above research strongly suggests a link between strong unit cohesion and a greater resistance to stress. The findings that personnel

stability, specialized training, and common experience are primary influences on the development of cohesion is critical. More important, however, is that stress reduction occurs through development of unit cohesion.

Leadership Environment

The leadership environment is a composite product of the personalities, attitudes, and command relationships within the command structure. This environment will conform to and remains highly dependent on the commander's expectations of leadership. It is a major influence on the effectiveness of the stress management program.

Leaders Must Deal With Stressors

A major consideration is the manner in which the leadership deals with the actual and/or perceived presence of stressors within the leadership. Granted, the leadership environment is by nature demanding and stressful and the level of stress is related to the unit's mission. Stress can be mitigated when a supportive leadership environment exists. The unit leadership needs to remain aware that stressors exist and that leaders can also become stress casualties.

Reaction to stress and its effects are generally observable, but are also very personal. In many cases leaders might attempt to lessen the stress by devaluing the significance of the stressor thinking that it would help the individual see how unimportant his "problem" was. This is an individual bias that each leader must guard against. It is important to be aware of "perceived" as well as "real" stressors and understand that in either case the physical reaction is the same.

Maintaining an aggressive program within the command to counter stress reactions for all helps build supportive relationships in which minor stressors can be dealt with before major stress casualties develop. The specific leadership structure in a unit will have a myriad of possibilities since it includes interpersonal relationships as well as staff functions. When the commander initiates stress intervention he will need to monitor it closely by tracking morale indicators.

Delegation of Authority

A second element of effective leadership in stress management is the acceptance of the need to delegate authority and associated responsibility. For example, preparation for a major unit movement is a very busy time for all personnel. By emphasizing proper perspective at each level of leadership two positive outcomes occur. First, responsibility for completion of the detail is maintained at the appropriate level of command. Leaders serve more effectively by remaining free from managing excessive details. Second, those in leadership positions remain free to manage the major tasks which is -- after all -- what leadership is all about. The leader's resources (time and energy) are reserved for planning, decision making, and implementing phases of missions.

In summary, the history of observations during command post exercises, field training exercises, and probably most revealing, from the National

Training Center, suggest that commanders wear themselves out trying to personally control everything. Unfortunately, being frail humans, they quickly fall victim to stress and general fatigue. They then proceed to make questionable decisions under less than ideal circumstances.

Development of a Stress Management Program

The previous discussion suggests that stress has a detrimental impact on unit performance. But, our discussion has also shown the benefit that unit cohesion has as a factor in reducing stress. Fortunately, commanders can influence unit cohesion through the implementation of a stress management program.

The program has two general aspects. The first deals with training related issues, and falls under the jurisdiction of the medical platoon leader (and physician's assistant), and the chaplain. The second aspect is concerned with day to day unit operations and is carried out variously by the adjutant, command sergeant major, and S3.

Awareness of Stress

The medical platoon leader's primary responsibility lies in the creation and implementation of a program designed to raise command awareness for recognition of stress reaction. This training provides an understanding of the dysfunctional behaviors that result from stress reaction. Leaders should receive this training first and then participate in the training of the battalion personnel.

The medical platoon leader may also monitor sick call for trends that might suggest an increase in stress related casualties. Reporting such trends could become a part of regular staff meetings.

Listening Skills

A second training program could be developed by the chaplain and used with leaders to learn common techniques for individual counseling to identify stress reactions. This training would increase the leader's ability to listen to the soldier's problems, thereby reducing stress. While it is assumed that leaders have been trained to counsel their men, more emphasis is needed to acquire more adept listening skills to include empathy and the identification of potential problems before soldiers become stress casualties.

Personnel Actions

The adjutant could reduce stressors by insuring that personnel actions (such as current power of attorney, will, insurance) are up to date for all soldiers. The effort needed to complete these relatively simple actions is more than compensated for by the sense of security they provide soldiers.

Morale Monitoring

The responsibility of the command sergeant major (CSM) is to monitor the state of morale within the battalion. The CSM must provide input and recommendations to commanders on a regular basis.

Operations

The S-3 publishes schedules during post support and training cycles that provide as much detail as possible. Stress is reduced since time for individuals not committed to post support is kept productive.

Division Support

Support for the development of a stress management program can be provided through the division staff. One significant contribution would be the method the division chooses to use in conducting personnel replacement.

Griffith (1987) reported the significance of specialized training, shared experience and bonding (Bartone, 1987), and stability in enhancing unit cohesion and the role of cohesion in reducing stress casualties. An airborne unit, for example, already has the benefit of specialized training. In addition, most airborne units have the advantage of strong unit identity. The two remaining factors (shared experience and stability) can be influenced by division through stabilizing personnel replacement procedures. By focusing on filling each brigade (and its battalions) during post support cycle, integration of new soldiers can take place with less turmoil and will yield faster bonding and unit cohesion. The replacements will have established an initial degree of rapport and unit identification prior to the beginning of the training cycle. During the training cycle the shared experience of mission training, stamina building, and sense of esprit de corp can be enhanced.

All of these measures lead to cohesion and improved morale increasing the chance of unit tactical proficiency -- thus reducing stress. Taking advantage of the post support cycle to integrate new personnel should be emphasized at the highest level of command.

Summary

Realistic training in a realistic environment is critical to insure optimal mission performance. Commanders must insure that training is as real as possible, to include stress evaluation as part of the stress management program. FM 26-2 should be a functional part of staff activities and an area of command emphasis. Commanders need to coordinate at the highest level possible to influence the method of personnel replacements and stabilization of unit personnel. Above all, commanders must recognize their own requirement for rest during stressful situations.

Commanders at battalion level, and above, can implement stress resistance training, enhance command awareness of stress, and create a command/leadership environment which effectively combats stress. Effective training builds unit

cohesion and increases the operational capabilities of the unit. Effective training also reduces deterrents to combat readiness, such as stress.

Maintaining readiness even during post support by conducting individual training in small self sufficient groups, daily physical training and stamina building, making provisions for annual leave and unit fun activities makes the time productive for the unit as well as for the post. Attention to personnel transfers during post support would let the training cycle begin with minimum personnel disruption and let the mission cycle begin with a well trained, cohesive unit prepared to cope with the deployment mission and associated stress of being ready for combat but often having to wait.

Perhaps leaders could even carry a small card as a reminder of the generic signs of stress reaction as the signs will manifest differently for each individual soldier. When under stress any soldier has the tendency to forget simple tasks. This makes it imperative that a stress management program be implemented and practiced during all operations thus increasing the current and future success of the unit.

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